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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

I cannot myself

A prospect of beauty and unjustness

How not ot stop

I forget to look

The song of the husband

Concentration

Vozes-Mulheres, Women voices

Gabeba Baderoon

I CANNOT MYSELF

To come to this country,
my body must assemble itself
into photographs and signatures.
Among them they will search for me.
I must leave behind all uncertainties.
I cannot myself be a question.

(Previously published in *The Dream in the Next Body*, Kwela/Snailpress, Cape Town, 2005. Reproduced with permission of the publisher.)

A PROSPECT OF BEAUTY AND UNJUSTNESS

I walk down Heerengracht,
where pigeons dip their necks
like question marks into the fountain.
Then left at Loop, while sun slips

into the sea, and the moon takes its place
above Signal Hill.
Above me, starlings clatter
like typewriters.

Higher still, turning right at Wale,
the seagulls tilt like white kites
against the wind.

I walk on the old silences of the city.

Here is the place on the hill where artists came
for peace, and the view of the harbour.
Below the city reveals itself.
We still walk the neat streets of their paintings.

This prospect from which the city is revealed
was the burial ground of its slaves.
In the beauty of the streets is something
of the private grief of the bodies.

Under the angled mountain, the blue light.
the starlings are cold, but, looking at them,
I see the loveliness
of their chaotic and coordinated hunger.

What can explain
this exact and unjust beauty?

The flock clusters at sunset for warmth and seed.
Poetry cannot be afraid of this.

Sketching the streets, the artists stood
On the burial ground of the city's slaves.
In their paintings, is something
of the private grief of their bodies.

In precise patterns the starlings follow one another
and redouble on their own flight-tracks,
slipstream of warmth,
blood-trace of the self.

Nothing to begin with,
And nothing again.

Around me, the air is thick with history.
Two hundred years ago,
slaves could no longer be sold.

Nothing, and nothing again.

I look again at the painted city, falling
silent at sunset, even the birds stilled.
In the last flash of the sun, the city gleams
white and hard as bone.

(Previously published in *World Literature Today*, July 2008. Reproduced with permission of the author.)

HOW NOT TO STOP

Pa came to collect us from school,
the stern drive home.

Pa sat at the head of the table,
not talking at supper.

Pa stood in the driveway with his back to us,
throwing seed into the wind
with quick slings of the hand, drawing
the pigeons as though he'd called them.

Pa carved his own domino set;
on weekend games sly as chess, slapping
the final piece on the wood table.

Pa drove us home past the house he built,
from which his family was removed in 68,
never looking again in its direction.

Pa bought his leaf tea and hard cheddar
from Queen Bess supermarket
down the street from their old house.

Pa rehearsed how not to stop, not to get out
and walk to the front door he made.

(Previously published in *A Hundred Silences*, Kwela.Snailpress, Capetown, 2006. Reproduced with permission of the publisher.)

I FORGET TO LOOK

The photograph of my mother at her desk in the fifties
has been in my purse for twenty years,
its paper faded, browning,
the scalloped edge bent then straightened.

The collar of her dress folds discreetly.
The angle of her neck looks as though
someone has called her from far away.

She was the first in her family to take
the bus from Claremont
up the hill to the university.

At one point during the lectures at medical school,
black students had to pack their notes, get up and walk
past the ascending rows of desks out of the theatre.

Behind the closed door, in an autopsy
black students were not meant to see,
the uncovering and cutting of white skin.

Under the knife, the skin,
the mystery of sameness.

In a world that defined how black and white
could look at each other, touch each other,
my mother looks back, her poise unmarred.

Every time I open my purse,
she is there, so familiar I forget
to look at her.

(Previously published in *A Hundred Silences*, Kwela/Snailpress, Cape Town, 2006. Reproduced with permission of the publisher.)

THE SONG OF THE HUSBAND

At the University of Cape Town,
in a class on *Troilus and Criseyde*
at 8am on Tuesdays and Thursdays
with the only Black scholar
in the Department of English,
I learned from him
of deathless love and its forgetting.

Years later in the post office he said
I should have left years ago
there was so little time
before my wife died
what is there now

I listened, knowing
he gave to us those years
and some sense of belonging in that place
because he looked like us and wielded Oxford
behind his name, like the armour we all needed.

Today, on the news of his death, I remember
the end always comes too early
and love is both deathless and absurd
the end always comes too early
and love is absurd, yes,
and yet deathless

For Johnny van der Westhuizen

CONCENTRATION

Ahead of me,
a man and a woman walk slowly,
holding each other's waists,
no space between them.

Without warning, they stop.

I can't tell if they are talking,
they are so still, so matched to each other.
He looks thin, her hip is a little behind his.
Then they walk quickly toward the door of their flat,
as though they had used up all the time they had.

Two doors from them, a man with a black and grey beard
is smoking a cigarette outside his door,
watching the couple.
This is his house, his hand against the frame asserts.
When they step inside,
he throws down the cigarette
and grinds it out with his shoe.

Three doors down, a woman in a black scarf
is tapping softly, softly against a white door.
The woman faces the impervious threshold,
not wanting to be looked at.
This is what her body says,
do not look at my solitude.

Then I am at my own doorway,
remembering to turn the lock twice.
There are so many of them here,
my landlady confides,
a concentration.
It's not good.

This is the future,
these closing and opening doors.

Conceição Evaristo

VOZES-MULHERES

A voz de minha bisavó ecoou
criança
nos porões do navio
Ecoou lamentos
de uma infância perdida.

A voz de minha avó
Ecoou obediência
Aos brancos-doncos de estudo

A voz de minha mãe
ecou baixinho revolta
no fundo das cozinhas alheias
debaixo das trouxas
roupagens sujas dos brancos
pelo caminho empoeirado
rumo à favela.

A minha voz ainda
ecoava versos perplexos
Com rimas de sangue
e
fome

A voz de minha filha
recolhe todas as nossas vozes
recolhe em si
as vozes mudas caladas
engasgadas nas gargantas.

A voz do minha filha
recolhe em si
a fala e o ato.
O ontem — o hoje — o agora.
Na voz de minha filha
se fará ouvir a ressonância
o eco da vida-liberdade.

WOMEN'S VOICES

My great-grandmother's voice echoed
child
in the ship's hold
Echoed laments
of a lost youth.

My grandmother's voice
echoed obedience
to the white omnipotent 'massas'

My mother's voice
echoed soft revolt
in the back of strange kitchens
underneath the bundles
dirty white men's clothes
by the dusty road
that leads to the favela.

Yet my voice
echoes perplexed verses
with rhymes of blood
and
hunger

My daughter's voice
preserves all our voices
preserves itself
the mute quiet voices
caught in our throats

My daughter's voice
preserves itself
In speech and in acts.
Yesterday — today — now
In my daughter's voice
one can hear the resonance
the echo of life-freedom.

(Translation by Celeste Dolores Mann. Used with permission.)